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ABSTRACT

The case approach to composition is a successful alternative to the traditional pattern of instruction in which little attention is paid to the writing assignments given to students. An analysis of writing assignments from reputable textbooks reveals that many of them require instruction in some subject matter at the expense of instruction in writing techniques, and that they fail to specify a particular organization, tone, or purpose. The case approach to composition is based on considerations regarding student motivation, students' writing interests and fears, effects of writing for different audiences and of writing papers of various lengths, and elements of the writing process. Case assignments establish realistic problems to solve through writing and specify a specific context and audience. For example, a case on fund raising for an animal shelter calls for the writing of a descriptive brochure, a direct mail solicitation, and a speech. The cases replace essay anthologies and writing textbooks; they supply the writing situations and tasks, and teacher and students supply writing suggestions. Cases are less forbidding than essays, give students a sense of participation, interest them in solving problems through writing, and put them in interesting situations in which context and audience are significant. (GW)

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Assignments that Succeed: A Case Approach To Composition

Robert H. Weiss

The typical day's work in a composition course on any level is probably something like this: The instructor returns a set of papers, using the occasion to teach to the most significant errors made by the student writers, and the class may be asked to revise these papers. Then begins the lesson for the day: a new essay or story, a new feature of grammar or rhetoric is to be taught. Students ask questions, raise issues, follow the instructor's examples, respond to a brief exercise. The period is all but consumed with the subject. Finally, with an eye to the clock, the instructor delivers the next writing assignment--a paragraph or essay based on the day's lesson. And then exeunt omnes.

Some instructors repeat this pattern because they know no other. Some repeat it out of cynicism. Others vary it with small-group instruction, individual conferences, the overhead projector, and other helpful pedagogical techniques. But the pattern itself is well-established. Variations hardly obscure it. And it is routine even for composition teachers whose philosophies of instruction differ drastically. We are familiar with its strengths because we have ironed out many of its weaknesses, but at least one weakness remains, and it is of such fundamental importance as to make the validity of our conventional pattern of writing instruction highly questionable.

As a profession we have generally little regard to the nature of the writing tasks we demand of our students and how we assign them. We forget that assignments themselves are in many ways the heart of our courses--they are our tests, they engender and illuminate the skills that we are supposed to teach, and they have more immediate importance for our students than the chapters they read or even the lessons they learn. Yet so enwrapped are we in

our daily pedagogical pattern and the process of collecting or returning student papers that we habitually relegate the actual writing assignment to the last few minutes of a class. Our most careful thought is given to the subject of composition, or to a principle of composition, and we are therefore grateful that our textbooks provide us with ready-made writing tasks that seem to demand of us very little scrutiny or effort.

An unfortunate reversal of what is surely our intention occurs almost whenever we give a writing assignment: our assignments are hurried and superficial; they do not necessarily derive from our individual teaching, from what goes on in our classrooms; they are frequently stale or trite, drab or unexciting; they are usually not specific in subject, purpose, tone, or audience; they do not often seem useful to the students who have to write them, except to produce a grade; they regularly cause confusion in students wrestling with them; they emphasize product rather than process; and--perhaps worst of all--they encourage what Ken Macrorie once called "Engfish"--phony academic language.[1]

Whatever the cause, the effect is that we and until recently most of the authors of our textbooks have failed to heed clear warnings about the problem of the ineffective writing assignment. Some of these warnings appeared in the 1960's and are conveniently collected together in Teaching Freshman Composition, an anthology edited by Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett.[2] Wayne Booth, in a fine essay, stated unequivocally that a student will find it difficult to write "until his rhetorical problem is solved--until, that is, he has found a definition of his audience, his argument, and his...proper tone of voice."[3] Albert Kitzhaber's seminal study of composition suggested some reason, still valid, why we have failed to help our students achieve these necessary pre-writing conditions:

Often there appears to be little real difference between the kind

of content and writing assignments found in the freshman course and those with which the student has grown all too familiar during the three or four years before he entered college--topic sentences and the uses of the apostrophe, sentence outlines and subject-verb agreement, papers to be written on "My Favorite Teacher," "A Happy Vacation," "My Most Embarrassing Moment."[4]

More recently, Ken Macrorie has excoriated the typical writing assignment in freshman English and the pedagogy that produces it: "The students know theme writers seldom put down anything that counts for them. No one outside school ever writes anything called themes. Apparently they are teachers' exercises, not really a kind of communication."[5] This is indeed dire, but not as despairing as many another broad criticism of our profession, for example, this by Francis Christensen:

> In composition courses we do not really teach our captive charges to write better--we merely expect them to. And so we merely go through the motions. Our courses are elaborate evasions of the real problem. They permit us to put in our time and do almost anything else we'd rather be doing instead of buckling down to the hard work of making a difference in the student's understanding and manipulation of language.[6]

I can quickly illustrate the essential truth of these charges by referring to several assignments chosen at random out of reputable textbooks:

1. The Spelling Problems of the Freshman Class at My College.[7]
2. Write a short essay on regional variations in pronunciation after comparing your pronunciation of the words below with that of other members of the class, etc.[8]
3. Select a topic about which you have little information but

many prejudices, such as The Menace of Federal Encroachments on American Freedom, or What's Wrong with Modern Women, and write a 1000-word essay consisting solely of sweeping generalizations, broad judgements, and unfounded inferences.[9]

4. Discuss and illustrate how men or women today attempt to attract each other's attention; or discuss and illustrate courtship patterns among people you have observed (in junior high school, high school, or college; among the middle-aged; or senior citizens).[10]

5. Using the same organization employed in the essay just read, write a 300-500 word comparison-contrast essay on one of the following; your perception of different experiences within a single context: a high school class and a college class, dating American style and dating European style, city and small-town living, domestic and foreign cars, etc....[11]

6. Write freely for 20 or 30 minutes about something or somebody you know. Let yourself record the lumps and grooves, the dents and spikes.[12]

I do not mean to consign such assignments to utter perdition: their worth is suggested by their popularity in composition courses nationwide, and they are from otherwise good texts. But some features shared by such typical assignments are worth noting, and in some important ways they can be faulted.

Many of them require extensive instruction in some subject matter, inevitably at the expense of instruction in writing techniques and strategies. Even worse, a large block of class time must certainly be spent in rereading essays for the class, even when the essay material is contemporary, journalistic, upbeat, and "relevant." The result is that information no doubt valuable to

know but not requisite to the actual process of writing consumes class time and professorial energy.

Perhaps as a result of this expense of energy, almost all freshman composition assignments are stingy in their directions to the student. Many of them do not require a particular organization, tone, or purpose; only a few specify an audience other than the instructor or are constructed to produce anything other than writing exercises with no ascertainable value except in Freshman Composition. Hardly any establish a sense of process and a set of choices for the writer.

Unquestionably, instructors compensate for the paucity of invention in these textbook assignments. Yet we should all realize that if we are to demand rhetorical invention from our students, we set them a flabby example when our assignments to them betray rhetorical and pedagogical poverty. Discuss this, analyze that, argue for this but don't be too general—such assignments demonstrate an almost conspiratorial refusal on the part of English teachers to invent the kind of task that can actually help train their students to write.

Faced with this failure, I and a colleague sought an answer. Again, clues throughout the literature on composition suggested a remedy. English teachers are supposed to be able to write; as the Bay Area Writing Project has shown, teachers who write become better teachers. What better things for us to write than our assignments to our students? We could spend time tailoring them to the specific needs of our classes and solve some of the problems our textbooks cause.

Our profession had provided--and in turn we have conveyed to our students--plenty of sound guidance for such an enterprise. We knew that "writing cannot be taught in a vacuum;" that "writing must be about something."[13] We could supply the something and its context. We could also commit ourselves to following the kind of sage advice given by Hans Guth to teachers using one

of his texts:

> The first step, making the assignment, deserves more attention than it usually gets. Finding the right assignment, and wording it right, is half the battle. A good writing assignment must do justice to three requirements: it should be meaningful, realistic, and specific.[14]

That too seemed an attainable goal if we took it seriously. Perhaps we could go further by making our assignments fulfill Kenneth Burke's dictum that rhetorical discourse is or should be itself a form of action, not simply a way to induce action. And we could use our experience as teachers to formulate writing tasks that responded to seven of the fundamental questions mapped out in 1963 by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer:

1. What kinds of situations and assignments at various levels of schooling stimulate a desire to write well?
2. What do different kinds of students prefer to write about when relieved of the expectations and requirements of teachers and others?
3. What are the sources of fear and resentment of writing?
4. What is the effect on writing of having the student compose his paper for different kinds of readers?
5. What is the relative effectiveness of writing shorter and longer papers at various levels of maturity and proficiency?
6. What is involved in the act of writing?
7. How does a person go about starting a paper? What questions must he answer for himself?[15]

Answering these questions is what our case approach to composition is about, and we offer it as a field-tested alternative to the traditional pattern of instruction described at the beginning of this talk. You are probably

familiar with cases used to teach law, business, psychology, and other subjects; you may have heard of the Harvard Business School's course called Written Analysis of Cases; and you may have used a form of cases in teaching the research paper. My colleague and I have spent much of the past several years writing, testing, and refining case assignments to use as the basis of college and high school composition courses. These cases are carefully structured and highly focussed writing situations of applied rhetoric. Many are completely self-contained--in a sense, data banks for student writing; many incorporate guidelines for organization, diction, and tone; some simply lead the student to locate information suitable for writing.

They establish realistic problems that can be solved through writing; they are based on topics taken from student life, career interests, or other academic disciplines. All of them require some form of role-playing in prose--but any artificiality thus produced is more than compensated for by their authenticity of situation and detail, their specific context, and their specific audience. Many cases have multiple assignments so that students can write about the same material to different audiences and for different purposes; some cases require switching of roles. Perhaps it is some combination of all of these features that enables cases to engage our students in writing and to stimulate their enthusiasm for writing well.

While each case assignment implies a rhetoric, no rhetorical terms as such are included in any case. Students exercise some imagination to assume a part in a situation that requires a writing task, and they learn readily to inquire into the strategies available for completing that task. They read only the cases we have written, and their reading is thus a pre-writing activity demonstrably linked with their writing. Class discussions of writing strategies are also seen as pre-writing activities. Indeed, little is discussed except how best to complete a case assignment, whether to imitate or reject some of

the case's sentence patterns and word choices, what has to be invented to achieve the stated purpose, what information and persuasion the audience requires, what stance and tone to adopt, and so on. Post-writing discussions are similarly directed. Rhetorical, grammatical, and other formal issues or terms always emerge from the concrete matter at hand and can be named if needed.

Let me illustrate by referring to two cases we have prepared. A moderately simple one, Instructions from Home Base, requires the student to assume the role of a parent and in it to use rhetorical analysis, primarily of process, to communicate instructions about baseball to a young foreign pen pal. The case requires a grasp of a complex subject, and understanding of the need to define technical terms, and sensitivity to the requirements of a particular audience; it teaches something about writing structure, strategy, emphasis, tone, and language. It established the need for clarification by explanation; it provides for the rather difficult technique of following alternative lines of thought. A somewhat more complex case on fund-raising for a local animal shelter demonstrates how one issue can receive different treatments for different purposes, and how different audiences have to be persuaded by different writing techniques and stategies. One assignment is a brochure describing the activities and policies of an SPCA branch, including its choice of euthanising animals by injection rather than asphyxiation and its adoption policy that encourages the neutering of pets. A second assignment uses the same material for a direct mail solicitation to community residents, and a third uses it to compose a speech. Each of these assignments calls for fullness of development, both by explanation and by illustration; the use of definition, of analyses of process, of cause, and of effect; each requires the sensitive selecting of word and phrase--some careful use of emotive language--and each evokes the use of such persuasive strategies as appealing to a common cause, dramatizing an issue, or persuading by degrees.

In sum, then, our cases are well-developed and lengthy vehicles for writing assignments; even those constructed for basic writers are longer than a paragraph or two. As used in our classes, they replace essay anthologies or "readers" and textbooks of advice for writers; the cases supply the writing situations and tasks, we and our students supply the advice in our class discussions. Cases usually have several assignments attached to them, each one realistic---letters, biographies, reports, narratives, arguments--and each one of course embodying a writing idea such as process analysis, comparison, summary, and definition. They help students to write by being less forbidding than essays, by giving them a sense of participation, by interesting them in solving problems through writing, by showing them the kinds of writing demanded in the real world. Those we have written are geared to the reading abilities of high school and college students, including basic writers.[16] We have developed others for fifth and sixth grade students, and we are working on more for advanced courses in organizational communication, so it is clear that case assignments can be prepared for any level of reading or writing ability. We welcome the cooperation of faculty at other schools in trying out and testing our cases.

Finally, cases initiate the writing process by putting students in situations which interest them and in which context and audience are significant. Their essence is the pre-writing that leads to writing; their format is suitable for peer evaluation and subsequent revision; and their frequent multiple assignments are effective for post-writing activities and for individualized and small-group instruction. Cases seem to succeed because they minimize the perennial concerns of student writers: why they are doing a particular piece of writing, what it is supposed to achieve, and what should be in it. Students can concentrate single-mindedly on writing since they have nothing else to learn from a case, and their instructors can concentrate single-mindedly on helping them with their writing alone.

Footnotes

1. Ken Macrorie, Telling Writing (Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1970) pp. 1-4.

2. Oxford University Press, 1967.

3. Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," College Composition and Communication, XIV (October, 1963), 139.

4. Albert R. Kitzhaber, Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College (McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1963), p. 13.

5. Macrorie, p. 2.

6. Francis Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," College Composition and Communication, XIV (October, 1963), 155.

7. James L. Sanderson and Walter K. Gordon, eds., Exposition and The English Language (Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 405.

8. J. D. Barry and W. U. McDonald, eds., Language Into Literature (Science Research Associates, 1965), p. 173.

9. S. I. Hayakawa, Language in Thought and Action (Harcourt Brace, 1964), p. 53.

10. J. F. Doriss and C. W. Harwell, Models and Methods: Guide to Effective Composition (Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 56.

11. Robert A. Bayler, ed., Detail and Pattern (McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 77.

12. Macrorie, p. 197.

13. Robert M. Gorrell, "Freshman Composition," from The College Teaching of English, ed. John C. Gerber (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965), p. 99.

14. Hans P. Guth, The Wadsworth Manual: A Guide for Teachers of Composition (Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), p. 41.

15. Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), pp. 52-53.

16. John P. Field and Robert H. Weiss, Cases for Composition (Little, Brown & Co., 1979).